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ABSTRACT

Some programs for helping at-risk youth achieve excellent results, while others do not. One reason for program success can be proper management. Mentoring is a promising strategy for helping at-risk youth. Planners who want to create effective mentoring programs should look at the implementation experiences of other youth programs. Evaluations have focused on the following four areas, which are crucial to the success of mentoring programs, or any youth programs: (1) service delivery systems; (2) targeting and recruitment of young people; (3) consistent program mission and identity; and (4) a focused operating system--leadership and staffing. That management factors are essential to youth program successes and failures has not generally been recognized, particularly in the area of mentoring, where enthusiasm is frequently the guiding principle. Unless the field matures and organizes itself, youth programs in the United States will remain marginal enterprises on the periphery of social policy. Funders of research programs must put professional development and training high on their agendas. They must support research into leadership and management skills and expand support of other research into program effectiveness. (SLD)

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Managing Mentoring Programs

A consistent puzzle in programs for helping at-risk youth is that no matter how good the policy or the design, some sites or programs achieve excellent results, while others using the same design and providing the same services do not succeed. It may be that the program was not the right one for the targeted group, that a different design or version of the program would have been more effective; or it may be that data about the program's effectiveness were not gathered or interpreted properly. But it also may be that the unsuccessful programs were not managed properly. Neither researchers, policymakers, nor program developers pay sufficient attention to the management of the programs. Partly as a result, youth programs are largely paraprofessional, ad hoc enterprises, given, of necessity, to day-to-day improvising instead of building stable and mature program structures.

WHAT IS EXAMINED IN YOUTH PROGRAM RESEARCH?

Youth programs of the past three decades have had some significant successes, and much has been learned about policy, program design, and target audiences (Hahn & Lerman, 1985; Hahn & Danzberger, 1987). Nonetheless, few programs have had the desired, widespread impact on the field. More often than not, local programs fail to reflect current knowledge of effective practices, and well-designed programs are undermined by faulty implementation. Differences between high-performing sites or programs and poor ones have not been entirely overlooked by researchers, but these differences are usually subordinated to an evaluation of the program's overall effects. Because researchers consistently ignore the "mundane" considerations of management and implementation, we know very little about why programs succeed or fail.

Youth mentoring is at heart a volunteer enterprise, and mentoring programs can easily fall victim to the fervor of their planners, who improvise rather than manage the mentoring. The field's mystique is that "creating the match" between the mentor and the youth is all that is necessary for success. The tacit belief is that mentoring is an intervention that can be "program-proof." But mentoring is no more program-proof than any other intervention to aid youth.

In any community, mentoring as a youth development strategy has to be marketed. It has to find public and private funders, and it needs to identify youth in the schools or the community and mentors in corporations, community-based organizations, and public agencies. Its planners need to identify a target group and develop a clearly articulated identity and mission. It needs specific strategies to reduce attrition among mentors and youth. And, because mentoring is a feature in many comprehensive youth programs, its place in and links to other services need to be formulated and maintained.

Mentoring programs are staffed by more than volunteer mentors. A project coordinator manages the program. Outside experts train, coach, and support the mentors. The program staff is the link between the youth, the mentors, the families, and the participating schools, corporations, and agencies. Often the program staff act as surrogate mentors, counselors, and advocates for the youth and the families as they deal with the program's operational problems.

What this suggests is that how a mentoring program is managed is as important to its success as the appropriateness of the service it provides. Mentoring is a promising strategy. Planners who want to create workable and stable mentoring programs can do this most effectively by looking at the implementation experiences of other youth programs.

AN EFFECTIVE SERVICE VISION

Youth programs are usually described in terms of the target groups served, the sponsors, or the type of primary service delivered. While these descriptions are necessary and useful, they do not evoke the inner workings of the programs. Youth programs are, first and foremost, service organizations. They are labor-intensive and require financing, marketing, staffing, and a way to deliver services to their clients. Whatever the nature or design of the service, it is provided by counselors, job developers, instructors, case managers, youth workers, and people who answer the telephone. This is the system the client understands and interacts with; to the client, this *is* the program. If the service delivery system fails, the program suffers — no matter how good the design.

The eternal quest for funding and the complexity involved in meeting funders' targeting and performance standards can significantly distract the management of a youth program. The programs are undercapitalized, with inadequate discretionary funds for contingencies. Although much has been written about these con-

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straints and their effects on youth programs, one does not find a fine-grained analysis of how they actually affect management practices in the programs and, in turn, how they impact the young clients.

The following information is drawn from evaluations of several of the present generation of youth programs. The material is organized around four elements that are considered to be essential for quality program management: (1) a well-designed service delivery system, (2) effective targeting and recruiting, (3) a well-articulated and consistent identity, and (4) a focused operating system.

1. ***Service Delivery Systems.*** Most research on youth programs tries to determine "what works best" by comparing the efficacy of various services, such as basic skills instruction, job placement, support services, and occupational training. This research serves the field well by sending a message to practitioners that some things *do* work, and the results have helped stimulate a new generation of programs: academically enriched summer programs, long-term comprehensive youth programs, mentoring, apprenticeship, competency-based programs, and the basic skills movement.

Some critics, however, have argued that the data do not support the policy implications cited in press releases and research summaries. No longer content simply to compare one "silver bullet" to another, some of the new research is digging deeper into how service is delivered and how that delivery is organized, staffed, and managed. These critics argue, for example, that successful programs, such as the San Jose Center for Employment Training (CET), simply had more able staff, a clearer, more consistent identity, and a better-run organization than other programs.

2. ***Targeting and Recruitment.*** Even in the best of circumstances, recruitment of young people into youth programs is no easy task. Because agencies have few resources to devote to the administrative functions of outreach and recruitment, these tasks are frequently carried out by the least experienced program staff. The long-run results are often detrimental. Once a program loses its reputation in a community, it can take years to regain the confidence of potential young clients.

The difficulty that some youth programs have in recruiting young people may be because of the reputation of the programs, the availability of alternative opportunities in the community, or perhaps the inadequacy of outreach efforts. Although many people are trying to solve this problem, most concentrate on changing program designs rather than on recruitment and outreach practices. The marketing of youth programs, like marketing in the private sector, is successful only when it concentrates on the clients' desires rather than on what the seller has decided are their needs.

One study of the multi-site Jobstart demonstration for high school dropouts, while examining different program designs, also monitored program implementation. Many sites faced substantial difficulties in recruiting and enrolling dropouts, but those that had carefully crafted recruitment strategies in place or that tailored their services to the special interests of their clients were generally able to meet the challenge.

Another aspect of recruitment and targeting that has received insufficient attention is what is called the "take-up" question. That is, how many at-risk youth will step forward and take advantage of a youth program opportunity? This simple-appearing question is central to the marketing challenge. Nearly every youth program is able to report enrollments, and many (not all) can report how many youth persist through the programs. But most know nothing at all about those who, for a variety of reasons—including lack of motivation—don't enroll. Yet unmotivated people are just the ones that youth programs are created to reach.

The five-city Quantum Opportunities Project (QOP) has attempted to study "take-up" as a separate problem. Each of the five QOP sites was given 25 names, chosen at random, of neighborhood eighth graders from families receiving Aid to Families of Dependent Children. The research results to date indicate that the varying success of the five QOP sites in recruiting youngsters has more to do with the quality and freedom of the staff, an effective and consistent program identity, the level of agency commitment to QOP, the experience of front-line staff, and the agency's "service culture," than with the service design, the characteristics of the cities, the qualifications of the target youth, or even the specific recruitment strategies tried.

Part of the targeting and recruitment problem is that mentoring programs have not found it easy to determine who their clients are. Mentoring programs currently do not lack youth wanting to join; there likely are too few places for the youth who could profit from the service. But that does not necessarily indicate that the programs are reaching all of the right people. Only youth who *know* that they need help volunteer for the programs. Moreover, young people with the interpersonal skills to relate easily to adults are the ones usually nominated by their school or community groups and selected for the programs. Because community funders, mentors, and program staff want demonstrable results, they "cream off" the youth who can obviously profit from mentoring to participate in the program.

From the outset, the national Career Beginnings program determined that the ideal clients for planned mentoring programs would be what the program calls "tenacious" youth—those academically and socially able to take advantage of education and employment opportunities but in danger of not doing so. While many programs have followed the lead of Career Beginnings, others have wanted to serve youth who are at greater risk. However, if programs are going to be designed for seriously at-risk youth, program planners and staff need to consider how to reach out and find these youth, determine who is eligible, and develop appropriate intake procedures and assessment criteria.

3. ***A Consistent Program Mission and Identity.*** Businesses undergo rigorous self-examination to clarify their mission, their appropriate niche in the marketplace, and their cor-

porate culture and philosophy—thus establishing their unique approach to their customers. The combination of an organization's mission, market niche, corporate culture, and philosophy, is that organization's "service concept."

Although every organization has an identity and a reputation, shaped by how it does what it does, youth organizations do not always clearly articulate their identity or mission. By not paying sufficient attention to the management of their programs, they almost guarantee that their identity will be unclear or misunderstood. In a program with a clear, well-articulated service concept, everything that everyone does would be consistent and congruent with the organization's mission. For example, the night shift would approach clients in the same way as the day shift, and all staff members would know what the mission is and what identity the program was trying to establish.

The service concept is communicated by the way the program delivers its services. A heavy dose of self-paced individualized instruction says one thing about a program's service concept; a series of experiential group and empowerment activities sends another message. Unacknowledged features of a program such as the style of counseling, auxiliary program activities, the way the phone is answered, and even the physical layout of a site either reinforce or convey conflicting messages about the program's service concept.

Career Beginnings' experiences illustrate some of the complexities faced by youth programs that try to develop thoughtful service concepts. Career Beginnings' service concept was labeled a "mentoring" program for disadvantaged youth. The label was useful: easier to understand and express than more complicated ones, such as "comprehensive education and employability" program. From the beginning, staff attention was focused on developing a consistent, stable service concept.

The principal funder, the Commonwealth Fund, was attracted to the idea of voluntary mentors assisting and guiding disadvantaged youth. The national program staff, however, aware that comprehensive programs were more likely to work than single-service efforts, doubted whether mentoring, in and of itself, was a sufficient program element.

Other complexities arose. Was Career Beginnings a college-bound or a work-bound program? An ongoing national program with local chapters, or a foundation-sponsored multi-site, time-limited effort? Was it primarily to help young people through direct service, or an effort involving reform of the schools? Was the program established to bring new players such as college staff and mentor volunteers into the high schools, or was the program simply to get as many youth as possible to graduate and go on to college? The answers to these and many other questions affected what the program did and how it did it—affecting its service concept.

Career Beginnings has resolved many, but not all, of these issues about its basic identity. The self-examination has taken four years. If the process has been a challenging one for a national initiative with talented financial supporters, a skillful advisory board, and professional staff with years of experience in research and practice, then the process of developing a service concept in a local initiative, without the benefit of national resources must be even more daunting.

4. ***A Focused Operating System: Leadership and Staffing.*** Although the operation of a program has many dimensions, we focus on one central element—the staff. Far more than is usually acknowledged, an effective staff accounts for good program performance. Although evaluators, policymakers, funders, and planners pay lip service to the importance of staff, they rarely put staff training and development high on their list for policy initiatives or program improvements. Their attention remains riveted on program design issues, largely ignoring the people who make the designs work or fail.

Yet the challenges faced by practitioners are growing, not only because of the multiple problems of at-risk youth. The funding stream for second chance programs almost never allows for long-term, stable staffing. Moreover, funders expect services to begin as soon as the grant is made, "forgetting" that staff need to be hired and trained. The pressure managers feel to start up immediately comes at the expense of quality service to clients. Chronic understaffing and cash-flow problems exacerbate this cycle; senior staff must pursue more projects and "soft" money, leading to further deterioration of staff functioning and morale. This self-defeating process affects all management functions. With everyone too busy to assess client progress and program culture, it is difficult to develop a clear service concept.

Sadly, many youth programs are poorly run, an admission made by many senior program managers. William Treanor writes that, "[A] director who concentrates on upgrading the quality of counseling and care, in-service training and staff competence, wages and working conditions . . . is considered a lesser figure." Treanor adds that youth workers are perceived as "the underclass of the human service field" (Treanor, 1988).

Many people working in youth agencies are hired without having their technical or interpersonal skills assessed or screened before they begin working. This is not surprising in light of the lack of professional standards for most front-line jobs in youth agencies. Except for a generic college degree (not always required), staff are typically not required to have significant professional counseling or teaching experience with at-risk youth prior to being hired. In fact, the field has never seriously discussed what the qualifications of youth workers should be. To what extent, for example, should "community qualifications" (same background, ethnicity, or neighborhood as clients) substitute for formal, credentialed backgrounds? How often are these standards in conflict, where, why, when?

Only one national study of second-chance youth programs has directly addressed these issues—an assessment of personnel practices in Joint Training Partnership Act

(JTPA) programs (Berkeley Planning Associates, 1990). The study revealed that low salaries and workers' perceptions of a lack of advancement in the field contribute to high turnover. But program managers reported that they preferred to hire more staff than invest in training for existing staff. Chronic understanding looms as a larger problem for them than upgrading.

Staff in youth programs require varied and sophisticated skills. In addition to technical skills for organizing group activities and delivering program services, they need an understanding of human nature and an ability to communicate effectively—particularly important in mentoring programs. Beyond these, managers of youth programs need conceptual skills. Running undercapitalized and understaffed programs, they must juggle a number of tasks at the same time and see the parts of the program without losing a sense of the whole enterprise. The development of these skills will occur only when the field takes the training enterprise seriously for itself as well as for its clients.

Youth workers would benefit from exposure to an exciting new research literature on public management that demonstrates the absolute centrality of effective leadership. The new literature offers case studies of successful practice in the public and not-for-profit sectors. These studies offer convincing evidence that innovation is not the sole domain of charismatic leaders, that the skills necessary to launch successful initiatives can be taught and learned (Levin & Sanger, 1991).

CONCLUSION

The message of this Brief—that management factors are central to youth program successes and failures—has largely eluded the youth development field. Unless the field matures and organizes itself, youth programs in the U.S. will remain marginal enterprises run by people eking out a modest living on the periphery of social policy. Efforts to aid at-risk youth will continue to flounder, succeeding or failing almost by chance.

Although there is room for optimism, running these programs is just plain *hard*; the field cannot absorb new ideas, and no design will really work, until youth organizations are staffed and managed in a professional, competent manner. Only then will the training enterprise be taken seriously by both the public and the clients who need to benefit from it.

To bring research closer to field practice, funders need to:

- Put professional development and the "train the trainers" issue high on the national agenda.
- Support research on the role of leadership and management skills, outreach and recruitment techniques, the assignment process to match people to services, and case management.
- Expand support of clearinghouses that translate basic and applied research into the parlance of practitioners.
- Support technical assistance and in-service training of program staff. Explore quality appraisal systems and competency-based accreditation procedures for staff. Conduct research on youth work credentials.
- Put program managers on review committees to guide funding decisions for new research and put managers on advisory committees associated with the research.

— **Andrew Hahn**

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